

Who Was Matt Wade?

By

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Laurie Lindberg", written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

The development of this novel involved drawing upon my own teenage experiences, outlining the story, and writing and editing. The story is meant to convey the struggles and successes of high school students dealing with peer pressures, religion, and other typical adolescent obstacles. The book is meant to appeal to teens and young adults of any religious background. The book, however, is structured in a way that may also appeal to people of other ages. People of all ages can find meaning from this story, and the goal is to make readers think about how they have lived or will live their lives.

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- My wife, Shayla, was extremely important in the development of this story. She knows that she encouraged me to write, but she does not know that I thought about her while writing and looked to her for inspiration.
- Thanks to all of my friends who gave me both good and bad ideas. Thanks to both friends *and* strangers for contributing traits to the story's characters.

Author's Analysis

There typically comes a time in a person's life when he or she stops and asks, "What has 'this' meant?" The "this" to which I referred can be almost anything: a semester, a year, a traumatic event, a joyful experience, or even a lifetime. Human beings have a strange desire to assign significance to things that in all reality may or may not have had meaning. These moments of reflection often come and go as part of a midlife crisis or a New Year's Eve celebration. My moment – the moment you are about to read – is now in the form of a novel that has not come and went as many reflections have.

Truthfully, this project started long before I ever enrolled at Ball State University or heard about an Honors Thesis. As a high school student with a penchant for writing, I set a goal to write a novel by the time I graduated from college. Every time I came up with an idea that could be molded into a book, I wrote it down. Several interesting and not-so-interesting topics filled my list, but when I decided to start my book as a part of my senior thesis, none seemed to be quite what I wanted.

At the time I was trying to choose a plot for my novel, I was at one of those aforementioned ruminating stages. It seemed fitting that my novel should be an exploration of myself, an opportunity to assign meaning to my life to that point. Because my college career was just beginning, that exploration had to begin in high school.

You will meet several characters on these pages, and each one was inspired by someone that I have had the pleasure (or displeasure) of meeting at some time in my life. The story is what I have come to call, "fictionally autobiographic." Nearly every event that happens in the book has happened to me or someone I know at one point. The

fictional part is that, in the book, all these events were somehow related and pointed to an overall purpose or meaning.

This project, because it is largely drawn from real-life experiences, is admittedly void of extensive research. None of the stories I tell or the conclusions I draw could be found in stacks of reference books; each one came from reminiscing with friends or simply flipping through the pages of my memory.

For artistic purposes, I am reluctant to say which character in this book is me. I don't in my wildest dream imagine that this book would someday become a classic, but on the off chance that it does, I would rather the scholars guess which character represents the author. I will, however, leave some clues. First, I see a little bit of myself in each character. Secondly, when looking at the story of my own life, I don't see myself as the main character.

If I have written this correctly, the reader will see some themes develop over the course of the book. Again, I hate to divulge them all before the reader begins his task, but I'll mention some for the sake of this analysis.

The first theme – the one that made me chose this plot in the first place – is that of religious procrastination. I have been close witness to several people who say that religion is definitely for them...just not right now. The only religion examined in this book is basic Christianity. Christianity, along with many other faiths, states that there is a merciful God who will forgive past transgressions. This tenant, though, is often taken advantage of, especially among curious teens and young adults. In this tale, one character uses his high school career to sow his wild oats, with the promise that he will

settle down as he grows older. This is a predominant state of mind for young adults that I chose to examine in this book.

Another theme that is regularly brought up is cause and effect. I distinctly remember learning about cause and effect in the second grade. What I was taught, however, is much simpler than what occurs in reality. This topic reveals itself in a number of places from peer pressure to event planning. Is what we assume about cause and effect actually true?

I entered this project expecting to learn some things. I expected to learn about writing novels – something I hope to do a lot more of in the future. I have earned a degree in journalism, but I thought that doing this project would help me solidify my knowledge of character development, plot, and literary devices. It did to some extent, but I also realized that reading a book will teach you almost as much as writing one. Over the long period that I spent writing this book, I could tell that my technique was much better when I was reading than when I was between books.

That, however, is not the most important thing that I learned from writing this novel. I've had plenty of time while penning this story to ponder the things that have happened in my life. Every page reminded me of something that no longer exists anywhere but my mind. I have learned, first of all, that real-life conclusions don't always happen right away. That sentiment is used in this book. I originally planned to tie up every loose end in the plot, but then realized that real life doesn't end so neatly. There will be some unresolved issues at the end of this novel, but I feel that is a closer representation of reality than the alternative.

Finally, I learned that trying to assign meaning to events in one's life is a therapeutic practice. More often than not, one won't find that meaning he or she is looking for. In the end, though, they'll be thankful that they searched and will want to do it again.

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Chapter 1

There he sat, one day before his eighteenth birthday, and he was ready to give up. To give up on love. To give up on hopes. To give up on life. Not life in general, but the life he had been leading up to this point – this aimless, meandering life that had brought him nowhere. It's difficult to say what had brought Matt Wade to this point. It's difficult to say, really, what brings any person to any point. If every effect has a cause, then the path we trace back to the origin of the situation is endless. If a man robs a bank because he was poor, the path doesn't simply end there. Maybe he's poor because he didn't go to college. Maybe he didn't go to college because he attended an inner-city high school where the opportunities were limited. Maybe he went to an inner-city high school because his father left his mother with no money. Maybe the father left the mother because that's what his father did to his mother, and so on. The path is endless. But Matt Wade didn't rob any banks. He did go to college, though, and he had gone to a fairly prosperous high school. In fact, he went to a high school that was quite outer-city. And if we want to pinpoint one cause for the effect Matt is feeling now, maybe we should start there.

He went to Brown High School in Brown, Indiana. Home of the Brown Grizzlies. If we want to look back to the cause of the Brown Grizzlies, we can, although there's not much to tell. Brown consolidated in the 1960s from three smaller high schools: Pecksburg, Center Valley, and Brown. No one really knows how the name Grizzlies came about, but the school just narrowly avoided having the worst mascot in the history of schools. When the time to consolidate came, Pecksburg, Center Valley, and Brown all wanted something from their old schools to live on. In this case, it was the school

nickname. No school could have three nicknames, though, so it came down to a vote: the Blazers (Pecksburg), the Blue Devils (Center Valley), or the Burros (Brown). The newly consolidated Brown students wouldn't have minded any of those names, but each town hated the idea of their basketball team's jersey bearing the name of a school that had been a rival for the past forty years. Then, a young, confident English teacher named Martin Tuff had one last suggestion: combine the three nicknames so that everyone leaves happy.

"How do you propose we do that?" one of the board members asked tersely. He was fed up with this debate that had no end in sight.

"Easy," Mr. Tuff responded confidently. "Instead of making only one-third of the Brown school district happy, we'll make everybody else in the state fall in love with us. We have three names: the Blazers, the Blue Devils, and the Burros. Combine them, and we'll be the Blazing Blue Asses."

A gym full of people sat absolutely silent for what seemed like a decade. Some were trying to gather enough nerve to be the first people to laugh. Others were on the verge of calling for Mr. Tuff's resignation. A handful of others were seriously considering the nickname, completely oblivious to the fact that Martin Tuff had never grown out of his high school role of class clown. Then, suddenly, the gym full of people let out a great roar of laughter. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Tuff presented his real idea: The Brown Grizzlies. The audience loved the idea, probably for no other reason, though, than the way he had just endeared himself to the community with his crowd-pleasing pun.

Martin Tuff left a lasting legacy to Brown high school, and it wasn't just the nickname. Mr. Tuff had a special rapport with the students. They loved him and the

feeling was mutual. Now, every school – in Indiana at least – has its traditions. The students moving up from middle school all know about these customs. Sometimes they fear them, sometimes they look forward to them, but these rituals are no secret. Mr. Tuff was the founder of one of Brown's most beloved traditions. It started in the 60s and has continued ever since. On the first day of school, Mr. Tuff, the freshman English teacher, has his students write down their birthday, their address, and their goals. There were three simple questions on the paper he passed out on the first day of every school year.

Where do you want to be in life when you turn eighteen, and how are you going to get there?

Where do you want to be in life when you turn twenty-one, and how are you going to get there?

Where do you want to be in life when you turn thirty, and how are you going to get there?

So far, the tradition may sound hackneyed to you, and it probably would have been had it stopped there. But it didn't stop there. Mr. Tuff sent letters to his students on their eighteenth, twenty-first, and thirtieth birthdays. All the letters were basically the same, but personalized for each student.

Dear {Student's name here},

On the first day of high school, you filled out a goal sheet. You said you wanted to be {here} when you turned twenty-one and you would get there by {doing this}. Are you where you wanted to be? Please let me know.

Sincerely,

Martin F. Tuff

Mr. Tuff did this for every student in every class every year he ever taught, and he always found a way to track his students down. There were always one or two students who had seemingly disappeared from the face of the Earth, but Mr. Tuff was one heck of a sleuth. He'd go through parents and parents' friends; friends and friends' parents; relatives of friends and relatives of parents' friends, and he would eventually find the missing student. Where he found the time to track these long-lost Brown alums down, no one was quite sure.

One other thing made Mr. Tuff's questionnaires unique: He never asked his students to speculate beyond the age of thirty. He said the future is too uncertain. Some students questioned why that was.

"If the future is so uncertain," at least one student per year would ask, "why do we have to do this at all?"

"Every effect has a cause," Mr. Tuff would say perennially as if he were reading from a script. "One thing might happen six years down the line that would keep you from doing what you want twenty-five years down the line. There's no use in being disappointed that you didn't meet your goals when your path in life has shifted."

The group usually found that answer suitable, and moved on. They didn't know, though, that Mr. Tuff wasn't concerned about the students' future being uncertain. He was worried about his own. When he first came up with this idea, Mr. Tuff had the foresight to know that he would someday retire. He was confident that he would live fifteen years after stepping away from the classroom forever. That would give him enough time, he assumed, to write his last class when they turned thirty. Beyond that, though, his future as an old man was uncertain.

Mr. Tuff's last year at Brown High School happened to be Matt Wade's first.

Matt came into high school pretty much like every other fourteen-year-old kid. He was an obnoxious adolescent trying to suppress his raging hormones just enough to be considered cool, but not enough – unfortunately – to actually be cool. Anyone who looked could tell that Matt wasn't going to be playing football for the Grizzlies that fall; he wasn't built for it. He was a thin boy with just enough meat on his bones to keep him from disappearing when he made a 90-degree pivot while talking to you. His wiry frame did not come from working out or dieting, though. Exercise was the farthest thing from his mind during the summer before his freshman year, and a healthy diet of Mountain Dew and Doritos kept his stomach satisfied while his father was working during the summer months. Instead, Matt's stature probably came from his jeans. Matt always wore blue jeans. They would be accompanied by different shirts on a daily basis, but his jeans, much like his genes, seemed to be set from the day he was born.

Matt Wade had exactly one good friend. This was somewhat strange, because Matt was one of the most outgoing kids in the school. He was, without a doubt, one of the top two or three class clowns the freshmen had that year. He liked people and people generally liked him back. But when the stream of popularity flowed into the river of friendship, Matt was in over his head. He had no good explanation for why this was and he really didn't need to explain anything to anybody because Matt didn't realize he wasn't a good friend. He would exchange witty banter with classmates in the hallway, he would yell out a boisterous – and often inappropriate – word or two during passing period, or he would casually flirt with the pretty girls, but these people weren't really good friends. Joe Abner was Matt's only really good friend.

There are a lot of theories as to why friendships begin. Some say in order to be good friends, two people must be a lot alike. Others would subscribe to the idea that good friends are better off being completely different. Still others believe that friendship is a matter of fate, a right-place-at-the-right-time enigma that no person can solve in a limited time on Earth.

Those theories may satisfy philosophers because the debate they inspire is quite intriguing. All of those theories, however, are also wrong. They both fall short of a fourth theory, one that is rarely talked about and rarely disputed. The fact that it is never disputed, though, probably stems from the fact that it is hardly ever mentioned. It goes like this: One person befriends another because the second person has something the first lacks. It could be something material, something physical, or even an emotional characteristic the other person longs for subconsciously. If the first person has nothing to offer the second in return, the relationship won't work. But when each person fills a void in the other's life, the bond can grow into a life-long friendship.

As for Matt and Joe, they had an on-again, off-again relationship that began earlier than either of the two could remember. The year-by-year status of the friendship had less to do with their attitudes toward each other than it did with their homeroom teacher. In kindergarten and first grade the two shared a homeroom: the friendship was on. They split for second and third grades, so it was off. Fourth grade reunited the tandem, and the relationship was on again. In junior high, it was off again. But come time for high school, it was on for good, and for good reason: during first hour, they both had English with Mr. Tuff.

Matt and Joe were a lot alike then. They both had an extraordinarily quick wit and an exceedingly flippant nature. If sarcasm had been a course at Brown High School, the two could have co-taught the class. The art of class-clowning wasn't a course, though, so Matt and Joe did the next best thing to teaching – sitting as far away from the instructor as possible. If the teacher were Maine, Matt and Joe would be Southern California. They liked to be far away from the action, even detached from the rest of the class if it were necessary. They didn't want the privacy so that they could cheat, because they had no reason to cheat. Both were gifted students. Matt, unfortunately, didn't use his intellect wisely at times. He was the classic underachiever. He had better things to do than study, or so he thought. Joe was just a plain achiever. A's and A-minuses marked his report cards, which was perfectly suitable to him, but minimal effort could have raised those grades to A's and A-pluses.

On the first day of school, 1998, the twosome groggily strode into Mr. Tuff's 7:30 class together and automatically played southwest to Mr. Tuff's northeast.

"How was the summer?" Joe asked Matt, shortly after the two sat down. Every conversation at Brown on the first day of school started with this question. There was no avoiding it. The students who had lousy summers didn't really want to know about anyone else's for fear they would hear what they had missed. Students who had outstanding summers didn't want to hear about lousy summers, either. They just asked so they could tell how great theirs had been. This question would go very far in boosting an ego or bringing down an impressionable teen's self-esteem.

"It was alright," Matt responded nonchalantly. "Just slept in and watched a lot of TV."

“Yeah, same here,” came the reply. This is how the on-again, off-again friendship became on again. If one of the summers had been better than the other, the whole chemistry between the two could have been ruined. One misplaced or misinterpreted comment about the other’s break could have burned the bridge that high-schoolers find so hard to rebuild.

“So, you ready to write down your goals?” Matt asked, knowing what Mr. Tuff’s tradition entailed.

“Yeah, I’m probably just going to wing it.”

“You think he’ll be upset if I say I aspire to be the San Diego Chicken,” Matt asked Joe. Joe let out a hearty yet quiet laugh, approving the joke. Matt knew that Joe was the one person he could tell that joke to. Probably no more than four percent of the Brown freshman class knew what the San Diego Chicken was. Probably even fewer knew what the word “aspire” meant.

“I don’t know,” answered Joe with a sarcasm that couldn’t be detected by the untrained ear. “That’s a pretty lofty dream. You might just want to go for the Brown Grizzly.”

“Good call.”

Soon, Mr. Tuff’s voice ended this deeply intriguing conversation. He spoke with a booming voice that was full of confidence. He sat on the edge of his desk with his right leg crossed over his left at the ankles. He had said these exact same words so many times, to so many classes, so many different years. He was well into his sixties, but he related to his students like a teacher fresh out of college. He was funny when he needed to be, serious when he didn’t need to be funny, and quiet when he didn’t need to be funny

or serious. Mr. Tuff was a natural leader. Matt Wade, on the other hand, was a natural follower. He sat and listened attentively as Mr. Tuff explained the goal sheets, and – on the inside – he aspired to be Mr. Tuff, not the San Diego Chicken.

Joe had said he was just going to “wing it” in the goals sheet, but that was not the case with Matt. Over the summer, when he wasn’t sleeping in or watching TV, he was often thinking about this Brown tradition. Where *did* he want to be when he was eighteen, twenty-one, and thirty? It took Matt about half of the summer to decide that he wasn’t going to specify the profession he would go into, the college he would attend, or the girl he would be with. Like in algebra, there were just too many variables for him to deal with. If he specified a college, but couldn’t pay for it, he would fail in reaching that goal. If he specified a female companion, but got shot down when asking for a date, he would fail in reaching that goal. Halfway through the summer, Matt decided to set goals that wouldn’t be influenced by outside factors. Goals that *couldn’t* be influenced by outside factors. Even if it took him the rest of the summer to decide what, exactly, those goals would be.

Because they were the farthest from Mr. Tuff’s desk, Matt and Joe were the last two to receive their goal sheets. Matt was the first one in the class who finished, though. No other student in the Brown freshman class that year had thought about this single piece of paper as much as Matt had. Chances are nobody in the history of Brown High School had ever agonized over this tradition as much as Matt did that summer. And so, his ambitions came spewing out of his pen in fewer than three minutes. Meanwhile, Joe stared blankly at his sheet of paper. At the end of class, he scribbled some goals down

that he wasn't entirely convinced of, handed his paper in, and headed out the classroom door, shoulder-to-shoulder with Matt.

"You got done awfully fast in there," Joe said, nodding his head backward towards the classroom.

"I didn't need to think that hard about it. It's just a stupid sheet," Matt responded, playing down the fact that this stupid sheet had caused him to think more seriously than any other event in his life.

"Tell that to Tuff when he comes hunting you down in four years."

"Well, what did you put?" Matt asked, trying to shift the attention from himself.

"You seemed to be thinking pretty hard."

"I said I wanted to be able to go to any college I want, and hopefully I'll know what I want to do by the time I get there. Then, when I'm twenty-one, I want to be in school still and helping out with a church youth group on the side. When I'm thirty, I want to have a family and not be so wrapped up with work that I miss my kids growing up."

"Those are pretty noble dreams there, Mother Teresa."

"I'll have to check, but I'm pretty sure Mother Teresa didn't have any kids. What did you write down?"

Matt was noticeably uncomfortable with the question, but for no apparent reason. He had just handed the paper in to an aging teacher who would, for all Matt knew, take it to a small, dark room lit by a single, unfrosted light bulb and read the goal sheets over and over again until he had memorized them. Mr. Tuff would then follow each students' life from this room, high atop the town of Brown. It even crossed through Matt's mind

that Mr. Tuff might hunt down those who didn't fulfill their goals and torture them until they vowed to change their ways. Then there stood Joe Abner, an innocent fourteen-year-old with neither torturing devices nor a dark room high above the town, yet he was strangely hesitant to reveal his long-term goals.

"During high school and most of college, I want to live life to the fullest, you know?" Matt threw in the "you know?" hoping Joe would jump in with a "Yeah, I know," that would end the conversation right there. But his friend simply nodded. "I said I want to make a lot of friends, and date a lot of girls, and party, and get into the Guinness Book of World Records, a —"

"Wait, you want to be in the Guinness Book of World Records?" Joe laughed.

"That one stays between you and me, buddy," Matt said as his cheeks became slightly redder than they had been. "At least until it happens."

"You better start growing your fingernails now, cause you got a long way to go. Okay, so what about when you turn twenty-one?"

"Well, I want to settle down, you know? Get out of the party scene, start working toward graduating college, maybe find religion."

"Well, you know you can take care of that religion one right now," Joe said.

"Ehhh, I don't think so," Matt responded. "Not if I want to reach my eighteen-year-old goals."

Chapter 2

Matt and Joe parted ways for second period, but the split didn't mean that the friendship was off again. The two found a freedom in high school that they had not had before, and they generally used the free time together to catch up on what each other had done during the non-free time. Brown High School's lay-out was unusual. If viewed from above, the high school would resemble a short, fat capital "I." Two hallways formed parallel lines and were connected by the gymnasium. The gym, therefore, served as the nucleus of the cell. The first floor was closed off from the basketball haven with the exception of doorless entryways at each corner of the court. The second floor, however, was wide open. The Brown gymnasium was designed like a bowl. A twenty-foot wide concourse surrounded the gym on the second floor, creating a virtual rim for the 2,000-seat basin. A waist-high railing was the only thing separating Brown students from the Columbia-blue bleachers. This barrier also served as the perfect hangout between class, and each grade had their own corner.

The freshman class, Matt and Joe included, populated the northwest corner of the railing. These gathering places were a high school version of the floor at the New York Stock Exchange. Homework was a very bullish product. The price was always high, and there were always trades to be made. Languid students who skipped their assignments the previous night scrambled desperately to hunt down a classmate who did the work – right or wrong answers were an afterthought. The boisterous adolescents also bartered for phone numbers. The price for a freshman female phone number was always high among freshman boys, but the trend was not reversible. Freshmen girls were simply not

in the market for their peers' numbers; instead, they were interested in something more – upperclassmen.

But the buying, selling, and trading didn't start on the first day. Instead, 1,000 “So, how was your summer?” questions were asked, although nobody really wanted to hear the answer. Matt and Joe found the exchanges laughable and took off early for second period – Matt, down the bleachers to dress for gym, and Joe across the bottom of the “I” to history. For awhile, Matt could think only about the goal sheet that he had just written. He was proud of himself for what he had come up with. Vague goals such as living life to the fullest and dating a lot of girls were relatively simple ambitions. Matt knew that words such as “fullest” and “lot” were largely subjective and he could claim the fulfillment of those goals without doing anything extraordinary. He didn't plan on pretending his goals would be met, though. He genuinely wanted these things, the full life, the eventful social calendar. And he wanted to soar over the ambiguous bar he had set for himself and put a crack in the glass ceiling of success. Matt envisioned a life so full that it was bursting at the seams. He wanted to experience the life of a character in a movie, a life that, when he looked back at his old goals paper, would make him wonder why he set such humble standards. And the foremost thing in Matt's mind during the first part of second period was the ingenious goal he had just recorded. In an instant, those thoughts vanished when the girl entered.

Jamie Boyd gracefully waltzed down the same bleachers Matt had walked heavily down just minutes before. Her steps were light and carefree and it looked as if she were riding an escalator down to her seat, two rows in front of Matt and slightly to his right. She was one in a cluster of five or six girls, but Matt noticed only her. Her thin, curly

hair came down just past her shoulders. Its light brown color complemented her copper complexion perfectly. Most of the other boys in the class didn't notice her. She was thin and not very curvy, a trait that was an absolute must for many of the boys. But to Matt she was gorgeous. God, was she gorgeous.

Matt's thoughts immediately shifted from the future to the past. He recalled the year Jamie moved into town and began attending Reno Elementary School. When you're in fifth grade, the buzz about a new kid is virtually unmatched. What does she look like? Is she in the smart class? Who will she go out with?

Somehow Matt recalled a conversation that was stored somewhere in the attic of his mind. It was lunchtime on Jamie's first day. He sat down next to Joe and the rumors started flying.

"I heard she's a dog, but Todd Mayfield likes her," Joe said without even identifying who he was talking about. Jamie was the new kid, though; he didn't need to give a name.

"Nuh uh," Matt quickly responded. "I heard she's hot and *she* likes Todd."

Matt sat in the bleachers and smiled at the fact that he had come to Jamie's defense four years earlier. He would be sure to give Joe an "I told you so" during the next passing period. Although Joe most likely wouldn't remember the original conversation, and even if he did, he might still hold to his first assertion that Jamie was a dog.

Matt sat with a few other guys who were ogling in the same general direction as he was, but the objects of their affections were slightly different. The other girls, it was clear, were more voluptuous and thus were immensely more desirable, but Matt didn't

see it that way. He sat idly as Mr. Tharp, the gym teacher who wore sunglasses indoors, twirled his whistle and outlined the class rules and where to go in case of an emergency. Mr. Tharp then told the class to mingle until the bell rang. Matt had a perfect strategy. He scooted down one row from where he was and turned 180 degrees to face the guys he was sitting with – an insignificant move to the untrained eye, but a shift that got him one row closer to the lovely Jamie. As he had anticipated, Jamie eventually leaned slightly back and when she did, Matt casually shifted his hand, bumping Jamie’s right shoulder – perfectly executed.

“Oh,” Matt said casually. “Sorry, Jamie.”

“Oh hiiii, Matt,” Jamie shot back with a genuine excitement that filled Matt with an equal portion of genuine excitement.

Now it was Matt’s turn to say something in response. He hadn’t thought this far ahead, though, and the pressure made him uneasy. How could he start a conversation that set him apart from the rest of the freshmen guys without making him look like a love-struck teen?

“So,” he said after he had finally come up with the perfect conversation starter.

“How was your summer?”

“Oh, it was great!” she said as she touched the top of his hand with the palm of hers. That was it, Matt was in love. “I got to spend a lot of time with my family. Plus, I got to go to Tennessee for a few days. I played some softball and I got to lay out and get a tan...”

Jamie continued to list the events of a summer that was really nothing special. At least 75% of the freshman class had had a summer that was at least as eventful as

Jamie's, but Matt really didn't care. He hung on everything Jamie did as if it were the first time he'd heard of anybody doing that. She went to the pool? No way! She slept in? That's awesome! She turned fifteen? Happy birthday! I should've gotten you something!

"Well, I guess you get the picture," she finally said, wrapping up her list very tactfully. "How was yours?"

"It was alright," Matt responded nonchalantly. "Just slept in and watched a lot of TV."

He was proud of that response. It made him look like a man who didn't get too wound up about things. It was okay, he thought, for a girl to be excited, but a guy shouldn't make too much of a fuss. Matt probably never realized that he responded the exact same way to Jamie's inquiry as he had to Joe's an hour and a half before. His answer to Joe's inquiry was a prefabricated courtesy answer. The latter was a perfectly engineered response.

"Are you cheering again this year?" Matt asked.

"Yeah," Jamie winced. "This will probably be the last year for me, though. I'm not that great at it, plus I would just like to watch the games."

"Well, you just started last year, right? You can't expect to be an all-star."

"Right. But there's a lot of things I can't expect to be an all-star at. I might as well give those a try, too."

Matt liked Jamie's reasoning. He had never thought of it in those terms before, but it made perfect sense to him once it was said. A whole smorgasbord of life out there. Why keep eating the same dish over and over and over again?

“Sounds like a goal you’d write down in Mr. Tuff’s class,” Matt said, looking down at the bleachers and picking at a piece of paint that was peeling off from years of wear and tear.

“Maybe,” Jamie said as she looked up and to the left. Matt’s statement had sparked a new thought in her head. Before that moment, Jamie hadn’t really considered what she would write. “I have him next.”

“So you haven’t thought about what you are going to write,” Matt asked, although it was more of a statement than a question.

“Well, I know what I want to say, I just don’t know how to say it and sum it up into a sentence or two.”

“Practice on me.”

“Alright, well, like I said, I want to try all kinds of different things. Like a Renaissance Man, except I’m a woman.”

“Right.”

“But I don’t want to get *too* crazy. I mean there’s a lot of stuff I can do without getting into trouble. And I want to be in the spring musical. And I want to get a scholarship and go into public relations.”

Jamie paused for a second and continued to look up and to the left. A smile started to sneak across her lips as if she were reading something funny hanging from the ceiling. Finally, she couldn’t hold the smile in any longer. She let out a cute, high-pitched laugh and threw her head between her knees. The sudden body movement sent her curly hair on a roller coaster ride, over her shoulders and head into her face. She sat up again slowly and gracefully brought her hair back away from her eyes with one stroke

of her right hand. Matt turned slightly and looked up and to Jamie's left, trying to find what she had seen to make her laugh so heartily

"Did I miss something?" Matt asked, squinting into the nothingness that existed up and to the left.

"Well, I have this other goal, but maybe I should save it and tell you later...or never at all."

"Come on. You're about to tell this goal to a sixty-year-old man who you have never met in your life and you won't tell me."

"Exactly."

"You're not going to get by that easy with me," Matt responded. He grinned with a dose of charm that he knew would make Jamie spill her guts. It worked.

"Okay, so don't laugh." Jamie was already turning red. Matt crossed his heart and hoped to die, while she revealed her secret.

"I've always wanted to be in the Guinness Book of World Records."

The shock on Matt's face had to have been noticed. His jaw dropped slightly, erasing his dimples, as he extended his neck in Jamie's direction. Maybe he had heard wrong.

"That dumb, huh?" she asked in a way that made Matt feel bad for his reaction.

"Uh, no," he tried to recover. "I was just thinking you had better start growing your fingernails out, cause you've got a ways to go."

She released her cute, high-pitched laugh and the conversation was successfully saved, thanks to a joke stolen from Matt not an hour ago. Soon Jamie was pulled away by one of her friends and their conversation ended. One might think that this, the end of

their brief dialogue, would disappoint Matt. He didn't see it that way, though. His four minutes in paradise had filled him for the day. He could have gone the whole rest of the morning, afternoon and evening without saying two words to anyone else and he would have been okay with it. To put it simply, Matt Wade had developed a crush. There was nothing simple about it, though, and this feeling was more than just a crush – or so he believed.

The rest of the day proved to be superlatively uneventful. Matt had wrestled with, and finally accepted, the fact that he would have to take the bus home after the first day, but it almost killed him to give way to this away. It was completely not okay to ride the bus home, and he would fix that as soon as possible. Finding a friend with a car was the key. Some unsuspecting sophomore or junior would surely oblige after a day or two of sucking up, and Matt would find his trip home much more bearable. That's why Matt's ears perked up, as if he were a dog being beckoned by his owner, when the announcements came over the intercom later that day.

"There will be a cross country call out meeting immediately after school tomorrow in the bleachers at the south end of the gymnasium," a voice from the ceiling said. At first, Matt thought this was the voice of God, coming to Matt's aid as he struggled mightily to come up with the ideal way to beg, borrow, and deal for a ride home. He dismissed this foolish idea quickly, though. Surely, if the Lord of all the Earth wanted to have a few words with Brown High School, he surely wouldn't do it via a crackly old intercom system. He would at least make a video announcement.

Matt immediately decided that he would attend the meeting. Cross country guys aren't cool enough to chastise a freshman looking for a ride, he thought, and they aren't

smart enough to recognize the fact that all he was trying to do was bum a trip home. He'd sign his name on a list of people interested in the sport and be on his merry way, no strings attached. He didn't even need to tell his dad that he had found another form of transportation from school, although he probably would anyway. Matt's father was the kind of guy that would like to know those kinds of things. And while Matt hated the fact that his dad wanted to know who was in Matt's company at every waking moment of the day, he generally obliged and released the information just to keep the old man off of his back.

Matt felt some sort of resentment toward his father, and from an outsiders' viewpoint, it was nearly impossible to see what that reason was, but Matt saw it. He saw it as clear as day and he had no reason to explain it to anyone, because, frankly, it was none of their business. It's not as if Matt's dad didn't care for him. He loved Matt unconditionally. Some would say he was an ideal father, and he bent over backwards to do the things that Matt wanted and needed. He cancelled dates, postponed golf outings, used up his vacation days to be with his son. Many fathers want to provide so much for their family that they work too long, too hard. Soon, they get so caught up in providing toys and cars and games and TV's that they forget to provide themselves, but Matt's dad wasn't like that. Sure, he made money — enough to provide some, but not all, of those amenities for his son — but he didn't make that money in exchange for losing time at home. He was always there to listen, to instruct and to guide his son. So, what was the cause of Matt's dad having such a negative effect on his life?

Chris Wade, Matt's father, was two years removed from his days at Indiana University when he met the lovely Linda Cook. She was a junior at a small college in

Indianapolis and he was starting out at a downtown insurance agency. The two fell quickly in love and got married a week after her college graduation. A couple of years down the road, they had Matthew Joseph Wade, and started a family. Linda was a tall, slender redhead with a natural, albeit subtle, tan. The way her crimson hair complemented her faded copper skin was unusual, yet stunningly lovely. She was a devoted mother who had sacrificed a promising career to raise her child for the first five years of his life. When she stayed home, Matt stayed home. When she went to the store, Matt was there to help push the cart. And when Chris came home from work, Matt and Linda both followed him wherever he wanted to go.

That's why it was such a surprise when Linda up and left, leaving Chris to take care of Matt on his own. Matt was struggling, trying to figure out why his mom had left him alone, and Chris was struggling, trying to play the role of both father and mother, while trying to convince Matt that he wasn't alone at all. About ten years later, Matt's high school career began.

"How was 'Day One?'" Chris asked Matt as he walked through the door, home from work about an hour after his son was home from school.

"Not much happened," came the response. "You know how first days are."

"Yeah, I guess. Do you want to get some pizza tonight?"

"God!" Matt cried, rolling his head around his shoulders. He wasn't joking.

"How about we eat more pizza? Why don't you cook something for once?"

"Why do you always have to bust my chops all the time?" Chris asked as he grabbed a few ice cubes from the freezer, something he did the minute he got home from work every day.

“Same reason you always bust mine.”

Matt’s dad stayed quiet for a minute, not wanting to upset his son any more than he apparently had already. Finally, Matt broke the silence.

“I’m going to a cross country meeting right after school tomorrow, so I won’t be taking the bus home.”

Chris wanted to ask Matt with whom he was planning on riding home, but thought he’d be better off keeping quiet.

“Cross country, huh?” He popped another ice cube in his mouth. “Make sure you get me a schedule so I can take off early on days you have meets.”

Matt laughed. “I’m just going to a meeting. I’m not going to run in a meet.”

Chapter 3

The bell rang, signaling the end of seventh period the next day. Classroom doors all over Brown High School opened almost simultaneously, and hundreds of eager students poured out. It had taken Matt only until second period before he had forgotten about the ride-mooching meeting. The lovely Jamie Boyd had stolen his attention once again and she didn't give it back the voice of God made a reminder announcement shortly before the seventh period bell rang. Matt happened to be in the same class as Joe, so Matt turned to his buddy.

"You want to come to the cross country meeting with me?" Matt asked, catching Joe completely by surprise.

"You know," Joe responded caustically, "I would, but the gymnastics squad is having a meeting that I don't want to miss."

"Come on, you'll just sit there and maybe sign a sheet of paper. You don't really have to run anything. I'm just going to try to have one of the guys give me a ride."

Joe rolled his eyes and went, resisting every urge in his body that told him to hop on the bus and leave Matt to make his own mistake. The two arrived at the south end of the gym and sat in the bleachers with about a dozen other kids. The only thing that made Matt even remotely nervous was the fact that he had run exactly one mile in his entire life. The ever-scrawny Matt had toed the line in sixth grade as part of taking the required Presidential Fitness Test. He did well, as far as he remembered, and he would have received the Presidential award too, had he been able to reach his toes on the V-sit reach. Matt knew, however, that any endurance he had gained from that excruciating mile run had probably worn off by now, and he would be left to start from scratch. That is, if he

ever ran again. Matt immediately recognized about half of the group, and wanted to start a conversation before realizing none of the people he recognized would have recognized him back.

“What’s up, fellas?” said a voice at the front of the pack.

The greeting took both freshmen by surprise. It had come from a pencil-thin, shaggy-haired student wearing a tight T-shirt and shorts with way too many pockets. Matt and Joe nodded to the pencilman as they settled into their bleacher seats and sat quietly as a few conversations went on around them. Finally, Joe broke the silence between the two.

“You fit right in here,” he whispered in Matt’s general direction. “These guys are all skinny and tan and kind of dumb lookin’ too.”

“Thanks.”

Matt looked down at himself and the jeans he was wearing. Then he glanced around the group at the others. They did look similar. Matt didn’t have the shaggy hair, but he had the rest of the package. He then looked at Joe and saw that he was the only one who didn’t really fit in.

Joe was not quite as trim as the others in the bleachers that afternoon. He was not fat by any means, not even chubby, but he was a little softer around the edges. Joe was about average height and had one hair that constantly stuck up on the crown of his head. It stuck out like a brown broom bristle that was bent out away from the pack. He had a round face and a bright smile that he showed often. He sat hunched over on the bleachers with his elbows on his knees and his fingers interlocked. It would have looked like he

was praying except for the fact that his head was not bowed. Instead, he was looking around, gaining as much information about the setting as possible.

“Marty’ll be here in a second,” the pencil said as he gave a piece of notebook paper to the student sitting closest to him. “Put your name and number on this paper and pass it around. And if we have any Ben Dover’s in the audience today, you’ll fit right in.”

That comment brought a smile to Matt’s face. Ben Dover was his customary alias when he wanted to keep his real name secret. He had planned to sign that name once the paper got around to him, but the pencil’s quip changed his mind. Neither Matt nor Joe had any idea who Marty was, but they assumed it was the team captain or the person who would be giving them the run-down that day. They soon found out, however, that they did indeed know Marty. The coach ambled up the bleachers like a man in his sixties and for good reason. He was sixty-three years old and his first name was Marty. His last name was Tuff. The fact that Mr. Tuff was the cross country coach would not have startled Matt and Joe if this meeting had taken place at the end of the first day, but a slight conflict with the elderly English educator the morning of the second day had dented the student-teacher relationship.

Matt and Joe had met up at school that morning and started the day feeling like they had been in high school for a few years. They got their books and were hanging out at the rail when Matt leaned over to Joe.

“You might want to stay clear of me this morning,” he had said with a hand on his stomach and a little bit of strain in his voice.

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“I had sausage biscuits this morning. They don’t sit with me too well if you know what I mean.”

Joe knew exactly what Matt meant and ended the conversation bluntly.

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” Joe said more loudly than he probably should have. “I have gas every morning.”

And so Joe and Matt went to English with a full tank of gas and sat in the corner farthest from Mr. Tuff’s desk. Mr. Tuff was going through his second day spiel when the sausage biscuits got the best of Matt, and they didn’t do so very discreetly.

Joe immediately burst out in laughter.

“Shut up,” Matt demanded through his teeth. “You’ll draw attention over here!”

“It’s too late,” Joe answered between laughs. “You already took care of that.”

Mr. Tuff, trying not to let the class’s attention slip from the front of the room, continued speaking about the text book they would use that year. Joe continued laughing. Soon, the gas in Joe’s belly mixed chemically with his laughter and the noisy result drew the attention of the class back away from Mr. Tuff. This time, it was Matt who burst out in laughter. The other boys in the room tried to hide their chuckles, and the girls in the room did not try to hide their disgust. Mr. Tuff tried to keep his composure, but Matt’s gas passed one more time, causing the seasoned teacher to change pace.

“Alright,” Mr. Tuff spoke up. “Time to pass out these books. Matt, Joe, why don’t you come up here and give me a hand.”

The duo left their seats and headed to the front of the room. Their cheeks were red, but only partially from embarrassment. The strain of trying to hold in their laughter

and their bodily functions produced the rest of the bright color. Mr. Tuff grabbed a stack of five books and handed them to Joe.

“Hang on for a second there, Joe,” Mr. Tuff said.

He then gave a stack to Matt. Then, he gave another to Joe and another to Matt. Soon, each had a stack of about a dozen text books.

“Okay, now wait there for a minute,” Mr. Tuff told the students.

Mr. Tuff obviously wasn't a very good judge of time, because his minute lasted for nearly twenty minutes. And so the flatulent duo stood up at the front of the classroom, each holding a stack of copies of “Yesterday's Literature Today” for nearly a third of an hour. Finally, Mr. Tuff let Matt and Joe – who actually found the punishment funny, but difficult – rest.

So the two were unsure of the reception they would receive at the afternoon meeting. After all, they weren't there to run anyway. Would the coach not like this and hold a grudge against them when they were in the classroom?

“Alright guys,” Mr. Tuff said. “I see some new faces here and that's always good. We are always looking for new guys to run. You don't have to be good, you just have to want to work.”

Great! Matt and Joe thought. His speech had begun and there was no mention of this morning's events. Maybe he had forgotten about it.

“I've taught and coached at this school for a lot of years,” Mr. Tuff continued. “And I have seen a lot of things, but I have never, ever heard to kids rip farts in class like the two guys sitting right here. I've heard of high school having tutors, but I've never heard of a pair of tooters.”

Just like that, “Marty” flipped everything around. He went from grumpy teacher to friendly coach. They went from being in trouble to being cool for not being afraid to have a little fun in school.

“Okay, so let me introduce our captains, then we’ll do our workout,” Marty said. “This is our lone senior, Andy McAffy, and this is our junior phenom Nathan Marx.”

The pencil and a kid with floppy black hair stood up and waved to the pack of runners sitting there. Then the pencil spoke.

“Hey, I’m Nathan. This is my buddy Andy. He’s more of a laid back kind of guy, so I’ll do the talking. Today, we do our traditional call out meeting three-mile road run. Go as fast as you feel comfortable going, but don’t try to keep up front in the first mile or Marty might have to come pick you up in the truck at the halfway point. Go get dressed and meet at the front of the building to stretch.”

Matt was stunned by the instructions. Not only had he not gotten a ride from anyone yet, but everyone was going to run now! They were going to run three times more in the next few minutes than he had run in his whole life. Panic nearly set in.

“Hey, coach,” Matt finally said when the rest of the team was almost cleared out. “We didn’t realize we would run today. We didn’t bring any clothes.”

That was a good lie, Matt thought, there was no way Mr. Tuff would make him run in his jeans, and Matt wasn’t about to admit that he didn’t plan on running at all.

“Why don’t you run in your gym clothes?” Mr. Tuff asked simply. “I’m glad you guys are thinking about joining us.”

“I’m going to seriously kill you,” Joe whispered to Matt when they were out of Mr. Tuff’s hearing range.

“Eh, just suck it up. It’ll be good for you.”

Matt and Joe got dressed and joined the team out front to stretch. They did a few stretches as a team, with Nathan and Andy up front facing the rest. They then broke off for any other individual stretches the runners wanted to do.

“You guys ever run before?” Nathan asked Matt and Joe as he pulled his left arm straight across his chest.

Matt reached his left arm straight up in the air and pointed his index finger down at the top of his head.

“Right here. Sixth grade. Presidential fitness test.”

Nathan laughed.

“Well, how’d you do?”

“I think I got second, but that damn V-sit reach got the best of me.”

“That’s why we’re stretching now,” Nathan said. He turned his attention away from Matt and spoke to Joe. “What about you? What’s your story?”

“My story is that Matt said we wouldn’t have to run, we were just coming to the meeting so we could get a ride home.”

“Well, if you run, I can take you guys,” Nathan answered. “If you want to sit out, that’s okay too, but you’ll probably end up running home because I can’t promise you a ride.”

Nathan was a cool guy, brimming with confidence – a good confidence, not the kind that makes you despise a person, but rather the kind that makes you admire him. He walked with a natural swagger, a strut that made a person know he had everything under control. It wasn’t an over-exaggerated street walk; it was just a little different from

everyone else's walk. That swagger didn't leave when his walk became a run, either. He ran smoothly, like a piston churning in an engine. There wasn't a hint of resistance anywhere. He wasn't the best of runners. He was the best on the team, but at a school the size of Brown, that doesn't qualify a person as one of the elite athletes in the state. Instead, he ran in the top few at local invitationals and conference meets, but was always just shy of hanging with the big boys at the state level.

The team did a few more exercises and, before they knew it, Matt and Joe were lined up at the entrance to the school parking lot, listening to Mr. Tuff's instructions. The course was not an exciting one. It was a straight shoot. Down to where the road makes a "T" and back. A mile and a half in each direction.

"I'm not timing you guys," Mr. Tuff said. "This isn't a race, just a fun little run to leave you wanting more. Get out of here."

With that, the eleven guys at the entrance to the school took off. At the rear of the pack was Joe. He probably could have put forth more of an effort than he was, but he was so ticked off at Matt that he didn't want any part of it. It was no surprise that Joe was at the back of the field. What was surprising was the fact that Matt was at the front of the pack – next to Nathan and Andy.

"Dude, I don't want to sound like a jerk, but you might want to hang back," Nathan said after about a quarter of a mile. "I just don't want you to be stranded out there at the turn completely out of energy."

"He's right," the quiet Andy agreed.

Matt listened to what his elder said even though he didn't feel uncomfortable at the pace he was running. These guys knew what they were talking about, he thought, and

there was no need to argue. He held back a little and fell to where Curtis, the next runner was.

“What’s up?” Matt asked when Curtis ran up beside him.

“Not much,” Curtis responded before speeding away.

Matt shrugged it off, assuming Curtis wasn’t much of a talker. He was then swallowed by a pack of four that he stuck with for awhile.

Nathan and Andy got back to the school first. They came over the final hill and sprinted the remaining three hundred yards before finishing side by side.

“How are the new guys doing?” Mr. Tuff asked.

“That Joe kid is in the back because I don’t think he wants to be here,” Nathan answered. “There’s one running ninth and Matt probably fell back there too. He was in the pack when we made the turn and he’ll probably fall back a bit.”

“You sure about that?” Andy asked with a nod toward the road.

Nathan and Mr. Tuff both turned to see what Andy saw. Curtis was starting down the hill and Matt, running at full speed, was reaching the crest. Matt’s gym shoes looked heavy as they hit the ground, but his feet made them light. His stride was easy even though he was gaining on Brown’s third best distance runner. Curtis was taking the last 250 meters easy, sure no one was close to him.

“You better watch yourself,” Nathan yelled with his hands cupped around his mouth.

Curtis heard the warning and turned to see Matt barreling down the hill, on pace to pass him like a two-legged bullet. His eyes opened wide when he realized who was coming after him and he tried to speed up. It was too late. Matt had too much energy left

and was already determined to beat his teammate. Matt crossed the line first and immediately bent over to grab the bottoms of his shorts.

“How about you get you some running shoes instead of those basketball shoes?”

Mr. Tuff said. “You look like a clown out there.”

Matt tilted his head and scrunched his eyebrows together as he gasped for fresh oxygen. The wheels were turning, trying to think of a comeback to the sarcastic coach. Finally, he gave up, turning his head toward Nathan instead.

“Can I get a ride home now?”

“Don’t you want to wait for your buddy?” Nathan asked.

“Oh yeah,” Matt let his neck go limp and looked back at the ground. “Let’s get a drink then.”

The three lead runners took their time as they walked into the building to grab a quick drink from the water fountain. By the time they had ambled back out to the front lawn, Joe was on his way down the final hill ahead of just one other runner. The team stretched and received a quick pep talk from Mr. Tuff before breaking for home. Matt and Joe piled into Nathan’s car and headed down the same road they had just run a half hour ago.

“You guys think you’ll come out tomorrow?” Nathan queried. Nathan was always asking questions. He seemed to have a genuine interest in other people. This wasn’t just small talk; he was honestly trying to get as much information about these students – these freshmen – as he could. Both Matt and Joe appreciated the fact that a junior seemed to care so much and liked Nathan immediately.

“I think I’m content with riding the bus home for the rest of the year,” Joe answered as he massaged his calves in the back seat.

“Come on, it couldn’t have been that bad. I’ve never met a guy who gave running a serious try not enjoy it at least a little bit,” Nathan said as if he had met a million people in Joe’s exact situation.

“It wasn’t all bad, but Captain Mooch over here told me that we wouldn’t have to run at all. I need at least a few months to prepare myself for a run. My body just isn’t very good at adjusting on the fly.”

“So you suckered me into giving you a ride, huh?” Nathan shifted his attention to Matt, who was sitting with his head flopped against the headrest of the front passenger seat. Matt was in a state of complete relaxation. His arms hung limp at his sides and his eyes peered out of the passenger side window.

“Yeah, and it was easier than I thought it would be too. All I had to do was run fast.”

“Yeah, what was up with that,” Joe demanded. “I thought you hadn’t run since sixth grade.”

“I hadn’t,” Matt answered. “I’ll do anything for a ride.”

“Do you want a ride home tomorrow,” Nathan asked.

“In this junker?” Matt joked. “I don’t know if I should be seen in this car.”

“Hey now! This is a classic 1990 Plymouth Sundance,” Nathan was adamantly defending his vehicle. Matt and Joe were cracking up. “Do you know how many miles are on this thing? One hundred and fifty-two thousand! This car is a beast, and I will drive it well past 200 grand.”

Nathan kept ranting about his Sundance, but every livid sentence that came from his mouth made Matt and Joe laugh harder. Even Nathan was smiling now as he spoke. “You guys laugh all you want, but in ten years this thing will still be taking me from A to B. Joe, you’ll probably be on your third car, and, Matt, you’ll still be trying to bum rides off me. And will I let you hop in my Sundance? No, because you called her a junker a decade ago.”

Nathan loved his Sundance. Probably more than he loved running. Maybe more than he loved anything.

“This car will not go down on its own,” proclaimed Nathan while thrusting his index finger into the dash board. “It will have to be taken down!”

Nathan dropped Matt off at his house a few minutes later, and headed toward Joe’s. Neither Matt’s nor Joe’s house was on the way to Nathan’s, but he didn’t mind, nor did he mention it to the freshmen.

“Hey,” Nathan called out to Joe as he was climbing out of the back seat. “Just because you don’t join the team doesn’t mean you can’t hang with us. Just letting you know.”

“Thanks,” Joe answered, not knowing what else to say. “See you tomorrow.”

“Right on.”

Chapter 4

Joe walked up his driveway and into his house that afternoon feeling good about himself. He was aching from his pathetic run – his first since sixth grade as well – but his ego was not bruised or even sore. That was just Joe’s personality, though. He was an easy going teen who wasn’t very worried about what caused things to happen. In fact, he wasn’t that worried about the effect either. He simply took things in stride, and didn’t let something as trivial as a next-to-last place finish at a cross country practice affect his manner. It didn’t hurt that he had been so readily accepted by a popular upper-classman, either. He was impressed that Nathan had left him with an open-ended invitation to be around him. Joe figured that he wouldn’t cash in on it all the time, but he certainly would not be ashamed to approach Nathan – or any of the cross country guys for that matter – down the road.

“Be careful with the upperclassmen,” Joe’s dad said after Nathan told him about his newfound buddies. “There’s nothing wrong with you hanging around them, but don’t let them get you into doing stuff you shouldn’t.”

Joe was slightly put off because of the fact that his dad had shifted a pleasant story into a cautionary lecture, but he was used to it and understood that his parents’ intentions were good.

“I know, Dad,” Joe responded blandly. “Just because I’m meeting some older guys doesn’t mean that I’m going to change. I’ve never been in trouble before, why would I decide to change now?”

“Baloney, you’ve never been in trouble before!” his dad bellowed as he flashed a large grin across his bearded face. “Tell me again why you got those detentions in seventh grade?”

“Oh come on, Dad, you know that was funny,” Joe grinned back.

“I didn’t ask if it was funny or not. I said tell me again why you got those detentions in junior high...or shall I call up Charlie Bruce and ask him?” Joe’s dad was having a great time torturing his son like this.

“Now, wait a second, he deserved to be depantsed!”

“Maybe, but did he deserve to have his picture taken in his pantsless state by one of your partners in crime?”

“What are you two howling about?” Joe’s mom asked curiously as she entered the room from the kitchen.

“We were just reminiscing about Joe’s checkered past,” Joe’s dad answered with a chuckle.

“Oh, you mean the time he and the rest of the bass section of the choir slung spitwads at the sopranos?” his mom wondered. Joe’s dad roared with laughter.

“Wait! That wasn’t me, I swear to you!” Joe was adamant. “We all got blamed for it because it was a substitute teacher who didn’t know any better. But I didn’t do a thing that day.”

Joe took the good-natured ribbing from his parents with a grain of salt. He was pleased by the fact that he and his parents could joke about the minor infractions of the past. First, he was thankful that the aforementioned run-ins were the worst he had ever experienced, and secondly, he was thankful for the fact that his relationship with his mom

and dad wasn't so rigid that he would be reprimanded just for bringing those mistakes up in conversation.

Joe's family was a tight-knit, smooth-running group. He had an older sister, Julie, who was already off at college by the time Joe started high school. Joe's extended family, he felt, resided at Pecksburg Christian Church. He was born into the PCC family, as both his parents were members. He grew up going to that church, he was baptized in that church, he occasionally sang in that church, and he loved every minute of it. Joe was sort of an anomaly in that manner when it came to religion. While many of his peers and classmates fought against their parents' wishes, Joe would wake up every Sunday, stagger wearily out of bed and head for the kitchen, where he would make and eat breakfast before getting ready to ride with his parents to church. He wasn't forced to do this. Well, actually, he was until the Sunday after he turned thirteen.

Joe's alarm clock went off at 8:30 the Sunday after his thirteenth birthday, just like every other Sunday. He reached over and routinely shut off the music. But as he sat up to start the day, a hand gently stopped him from doing so. It was Joe's dad.

"Hey," he said quietly to his son.

"Geez, Dad, you scared me."

"Sorry," he said with warmth in his voice. "Look, I just want you to know that you don't have to do this. If you choose to go to church with your mother and me, it would make us happy, but you are old enough now to decide for yourself. If you want to stay home, that's your decision. If not, I'll see you downstairs."

Joe was caught off guard by the speech his father had just made. He didn't realize that there was any choice that had to be made. Up to that point, he thought church was

for everyone – a sort of life requirement. After all, most kids in Pecksburg were made to go to one church or another for at least the first ten years of their life. The fact that he had a say in the matter made him think, and he imagined flopping his head back onto the pillow and sleeping until lunch time. As he pondered this option, Joe’s dad headed down to the kitchen and poured himself a bowl of cereal. He smiled quietly when Joe came down the stairs no more than a minute later.

“That was quick,” Joe’s dad said. “Even quicker than usual.”

“Easiest decision I ever made,” Joe said, walking toward his parents.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

Joe’s dad dipped his spoon into his bowl, gathered a heaping spoonful of Wheaties and lifted it toward his mouth. Joe was there, though, and he put his hand on his father’s forearm, preventing the spoon from reaching his mouth.

“Before you eat any more,” Joe said with a sincere look in his eye. “I want you to know that you don’t have to do it. If you do, Mom and I will be happy, but you can make your own decision.”

Joe’s dad stared in wonder at his son. He was amazed at the wisdom he had just displayed and was rendered speechless. Joe’s mom, who was sitting across the dining room table from her husband, shed a tear and quickly excused herself from the room. They knew from that moment that Joe would be okay, and that they had succeeded in raising the kind of boy they wanted. And as they joked with their son a little more than a year later, they had that same confidence. Joe’s mother, not wanting to be too hard on her baby, quickly transitioned from joking about his detentions to asking about church.

“Hey, are you still going to sing with Jamie, Sunday?” she asked. “Her mom called earlier and wanted to know if there was a time we could get you two together to practice.”

“Yeah, we decided on a song today,” Joe answered. “We’re going to practice kind of on our own, then get together some time Saturday to put it together.”

Joe, after about a year of practice, had become quite good with a guitar, especially for a fourteen-year-old boy, and Jamie Boyd had always been a naturally good singer. It only made sense that the duo – friends since Jamie’s family joined the church four years ago – would pair up to perform for the congregation.

Meanwhile, Matt was also busy trying to pair up with the lovely Jamie. Later that week, Mr. Tharp announced to their gym class that they would have to start thinking about partners. The instructor explained that the class would soon begin their dance unit. Over the next three weeks, every freshman in the school would learn the basics of the waltz, the foxtrot, swing dancing, square dancing, and line dancing. The boys, looking for any excuse they could find to touch one of their female counterpart’s hands or hold them around the waist, loved the idea. At the same time, the girls had partners in mind as well. One boy would often ask one girl to be his partner while a friend of the first girl secretly wanted him to ask her. When the stories were told, it was a crazy test of both friendship and pronoun usage that often ended in hard feelings. These are the things that cause young women to turn on one another – for at least a week or so.

Matt and Jamie had no trouble choosing their partners, however. Matt had not been shy about flirting with Jamie every chance he had during that first week of school.

On the other side, Jamie was not shy about enjoying Matt's flirting. When Mr. Tharp announced the dance unit would begin, the class was sitting on the hardwood floor listening to the instructions. Matt, once he heard the news, leaned forward and glanced to the right. He knew exactly where Jamie was sitting and hoped that she would return his glance. When he found her, he was pleased to see that she was already looking in his direction, also seeking to make eye contact. Matt raised his eyebrows, extended his index finger, and pointed back and forth between himself and Jamie. Jamie smiled, understanding the question, and nodded her head yes.

When Matt met Joe back at the lockers during the next passing period, he warned Joe of what was to come in gym.

"We picked dance partners today in gym class," Matt said, trying to curb his excitement.

"Yeah?" Joe responded.

"I'm with Jamie Boyd."

"No kidding," Joe said, changing his tone from apathetic to interested. "Jamie's awesome. You'll have fun."

"You know her?"

Matt wasn't sure why he asked that question. Of course Joe knew her. If he didn't, why would she say that she was "awesome"?

"Yeah, sure I know her," Joe answered with a smile. "She goes to my church."

"Oh," Joe nodded, well aware of Joe's religious background. "So she's churchy like you?"

“I’m going to take that as a compliment and say yeah, she is ‘churchy like me,’” Joe said, using air quotes to emphasize the fact that he didn’t care much for the adjective churchy. “Does that bother you?”

“Pssh. No. You don’t like her, do you?”

Joe laughed at Matt’s assumption. “No, but I can already tell you do.”

“No you can’t,” Matt shot back defiantly. “How?”

“First off, your greeting to me was ‘hey, we picked dance partners in gym today.’ Sorry to break it to you, but that conversation starter needs work. Second off, you told me Jamie was your partner before I even asked you who your partner was...”

“That doesn’t prove a—“

“Hang on, I’m not finished,” Joe said, interrupting his friend’s interruption.

“Third, you immediately assumed that since I knew her, I had a thing for her. That, my friend, is as good as a written statement saying that *you* are the one with the thing for one Jamie Elizabeth Boyd.”

Matt paused, knowing any effort to dispute Joe’s reasoning would be in vain. Joe knew Matt too well and his friend was too smart to be fooled. Finally, Matt broke the silence with an unexpected question.

“Her initials spell Jeb?”

“I suppose they do,” Joe nodded as the two walked toward the rail. “Sounds like she’s a farmer, don’t you think?”

Matt had no answer.

“I guess if she ends up marrying you, she’ll convert from Christianity and become a J.E.W.”

“Good one, church boy.”

Matt went to practice that afternoon feeling a little bit sore, but feeling great about being one step closer to Jamie. He wasn't sure exactly what he was one step closer to, but he knew he was closer to something. He couldn't really start dating her, he figured, because he wouldn't even be fifteen years old until October. It's hard to go on dates without a car and it's even harder to talk a girl into hopping on a bicycle to head into town. He knew that from experience. He didn't know exactly how the “friends” thing worked, either. He was completely used to being friends with girls. But does being friends with a girl you want to be more than friends with require more effort than it would if you were trying to be befriended by a female with whom you just wanted to be a friend? This enigma made Matt's brain ache, but at least it took his mind off of his aching legs. Mr. Tuff encouraged Matt to take off slowly on the day's five-mile run. He didn't want to burn out the potential phenom in only a week's worth of workouts. Matt – assuming that his experienced coach had more running wisdom than he would ever have – obeyed and hung back to finish with the pack. As he walked with Nathan to his car after practice, though, he noticed a girl sitting on the curb, checking her watch as if someone were late for something. When he took a closer look, he realized that it was Jamie.

“Hang on a minute,” Matt said to Nathan as he turned and trotted toward his lonely friend.

“Take your time, buddy.”

Matt reached Jamie and stood over her, his hands resting on his hips. It took a minute for Jamie even to realize someone had joined her.

“Hey,” Matt said when Jamie finally looked up.

“Oh, hey,” she said, trying to shake off the surprise of seeing someone – let alone seeing Matt.

“Need a ride?”

Matt obviously had not thought that question through. If she said yes, he would have to do one of two things. First, he could offer Jamie a ride and possibly upset Nathan that he was inviting more people along, or he could make a fool of himself by not being able to cash in on her need. Fortunately for Matt, Jamie bailed him out.

“No, my mom is supposed to be here, but she runs a little late sometimes,” Jamie said, looking at her watch once again.

“Okay, just thought I’d check,” Matt said as he took a step backwards, ready to rejoin Nathan.

“Hey,” Jamie’s voice stopped Matt in his tracks. “You’re pretty good friends with Joe Abner, right?”

Matt shrugged and nodded simultaneously.

“We’re singing at church together this week. Maybe you could come out and see us....We’re not together or anything. We’re just singing together.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll do that,” Matt answered as Jamie reached into her backpack for a piece of paper.

“Here’s my phone number,” she said, offering him the paper. “Give me a call if you decide you want to go.”

“Alright.” He took the phone number. “I gotta go though. See you tomorrow.”

“Be ready to dance!”

Matt turned to trot back to Nathan, but he had already pulled up near Matt and was waiting patiently.

“What is that? A phone number?” Nathan asked as Matt climbed into the car. “Way to go.”

Matt started to explain to his friend that it was just an offer to join her for church, but he stopped himself short. Matt was unsure what Nathan thought about the whole religion scene, and he didn’t want Nathan to think of Matt as being “churchy.” As the two drove home, it dawned on Matt how incredible that moment just was. He had just got Jamie’s phone number without even asking for it. Could it get any better? This meant that she had completely thrown the ball to him. Now, whenever he wanted to call and talk to her, he could. He was rounding third and Jamie was giving him the “go-ahead” sign to come home. What a deal!

Chapter 5

Matt gave Jamie a call during the day that Saturday. Matt was not much of a church-goer; his dad never took him and that was not a surprise since the person in the family who was religious – Matt’s mom – had practiced her God-granted free will by committing adultery. Chris still took Matt to church on Christmas and Easter – the important days, he thought – but there was no getting up at 8:30 on Sundays for the Wade family. Matt secretly knew that his father was a believer, though. He just had a feeling. Why else would they go to church on the big two religious holidays?

“What year is it?” Matt’s dad responded when Matt asked why they only visited church on Easter and Christmas.

“Nine-teen-ninety-nine,” Matt slowly annunciated the words, trying to emphasize the fact that he was confused over the question. “Why?”

“1999 *AD*,” Matt’s dad corrected. “If nothing else, Jesus’ birth is still the dividing date in history. If he was *just* a carpenter, he must have built some pretty amazing things that his birthday would separate our calendar system.”

That answer was good enough to keep Matt attending church on those two Sundays. It was also enough to make him sure that his dad believed in what the pastor preached on those two days. It even might have been enough to make Matt believe the sermons himself, but it definitely wasn’t enough to make him want to sit through fifty more of them each year. He finally decided, though, that he could stomach one more so he could go see Jamie sing and possibly sit next to her in the pew.

He did get to sit next to Jamie in the pew. They sat in the third row on the left side of the sanctuary.

“We always sit right here,” Jamie whispered to Matt as they were scooting into their spots. “Pastor Davis says it’s good luck to have us sitting here.”

“Is there room for luck in the church?” Matt asked.

“Of course there is,” Jamie answered without missing a beat. “Who do you think controls luck, anyway?”

Matt watched and listened intently as Jamie and Joe went up to sing their song. He was excited to hear it. First of all, he wanted to see how talented his two friends were, and secondly, he wanted to be able to talk to Jamie about the meaning of the song afterwards. He figured that would earn himself some bonus points as a good listener. The song was called “Waste My Time.” It was about a person – any person really. It could have been a guy or a girl, young or old, rich or poor or whatever. It was a ballad about anybody who lived a busy life. In the song, the person is talking to God and asking, “Why do I waste my time on you?” when he has so much other stuff going on in his world. Then, in an epiphany at the end of the song, this “everyman” realizes that none of the other stuff he’s got going on in his life is worth the time and he asks God, “Why don’t I spend more time with you?”

It was a really well written song, Matt thought, and he thought Joe and Jamie sang it beautifully. When Joe and Jamie came back to the pew, Matt sent them a smile and a nod while mouthing the words, “That was great.” Jamie smiled and looked down at her lap, trying to hide her blushing cheeks. It didn’t work; both boys quickly noticed that Jamie had been embarrassed by the simple compliment, but pretended that they couldn’t tell. By this time, Pastor Davis had already made his way up to the pulpit and told a routine opening joke. Matt, without any forethought or ulterior motives, paid close

attention to the message delivered that morning. Sure, he caught his thoughts drifting off to another place a few times, but he always brought himself back, careful not to miss a major point of the sermon. About halfway through, Jamie reached over and patted Matt twice on his unsuspecting left knee. Matt flinched, as he was too entranced to expect any outside contact. He looked over at Jamie and she displayed a lovely smile without showing her teeth. Matt shook his head chuckled at his own edginess. She then passed him a note; it was from Joe.

-- Jamie and her folks are coming over to eat afterwards. Want to join?

Matt furrowed his brow at the piece of paper as if it were going to explain itself. He leaned forward and held it up in Joe's direction, his forehead still wrinkled. Joe didn't know why Matt was confused any more than the piece of paper did, so Matt finally grabbed a pencil and wrote back.

-- I rode with you. Do I have a choice?

Joe got the response and held onto it for a few minutes while Pastor Davis reached a dynamic section of his sermon. After the preacher's excitement had subsided, Matt felt the paper fall into his lap.

-- Nope. Just thought I'd be judicious about it.

-- In that case, I'd be honored.

After the service had finished, Matt followed Jamie and Joe around, shaking hands with adults whom he'd never met before and would probably never meet again. It was for that reason that Matt didn't bother listening to their names. That, and the fact that he was looking forward to a nice, home-cooked meal at the Abner household.

The scene around the dinner table that afternoon was something new to Matt. Well, it wasn't completely new, but the last time he had sat at a table with a couple of families – a couple of moms, a couple of dads and a good number of kids – had been so far in the past that he had almost forgotten what it was like. The memories were stored somewhere in the attic of his mind, but he didn't purposely go looking for them. Instead, the memory seemed to beckon him as he watched Joe's mom share a funny, albeit somewhat embarrassing, story about her son. Matt would have fought the memory if he could, but it snuck up too fast. It came back to him, and he missed the end of Joe's mother's story.

It had been about ten years prior and Matt's mom and dad had invited another couple over to the house to play cards. The other couple had brought their twins over so Matt would have a play partner while the adults stuck to the "big person" card games. Sure, there were times when the youngsters tried to squeeze into a spot at the table and learn the intricacies of the complex game, but they got bored after a couple of hands. Without failure, Matt or whichever child tried to sit at the adult table would return to simpler things – slamming toy cars together, fighting with action figures, or the like. Matt, then about five years old, vaguely recalled his mother telling an embarrassing story about him. He wasn't sure of the content of the story, and as a matter of fact, he probably didn't even know what she was talking about at the time, but Matt knew his mother was getting a laugh from her guests by telling one of those "cute kid" stories.

If it happened the way Matt remembered, and he was pretty sure it did, the five-year-old version of himself walked into the dining room just as his mother was delivering

the punch line. Matt stood with his hands on his hips as the adults flung their heads back in laughter.

“You know,” Matt recalled himself saying vehemently, “Daddy does some pretty stupid things too.”

Matt’s response, needless to say, inspired quite a bit more amusement at the table, but Matt’s memory of that evening ended there. The next thing he recalled was his dad skipping work and spending the day with him. Matt and his dad had had a great time that day, such a great time, in fact, that Matt didn’t realize his mother was gone until he was being tucked in that night. Matt’s dad pulled the covers up around Matt’s shoulders and kissed his son lightly on the forehead, wishing him a good night and pleasant dreams.

“Is Mommy going to kiss me too?” the innocent five-year-old asked.

“Not tonight,” came the somber response from his dad. He was right. She didn’t come that night. She didn’t come the next night, either, and she hadn’t come since. It was quite a feat, Matt thought as he sat at the dinner table with the families of his two best friends, that his father could lose such a wonderful mom. He must have been a pretty despicable guy, and she was probably justified in taking off, but shame on his father for letting her go without a fight.

“What about you, Matt, any ‘cute kid’ stories you want to share about yourself?” Jamie’s mom asked, sensing he was being left out of the conversation. Matt was brought out of his reverie by that question, and quickly created a clever reply.

“Not me,” Matt answered, masking his melancholy memories with a grin. “I was mature beyond my years.”

“Ooooooh really?” Joe’s dad boomed into the conversation. “We’ll see if your dad agrees with that one.”

Joe’s dad, Doug, was a very boisterous man, the kind of parent all the kids enjoyed talking to. He was exuberant and pleasant to be around, and Joe’s friends always seemed to end up sitting next to him on the couch whenever they came over to see Joe. Matt silently wished he had a father of that caliber – one that he would not be ashamed to describe.

After dinner, the adults stayed inside cleaning and talking, while Jamie’s two little brothers watched television. Matt, Joe and Jamie headed out to the front porch to do nothing in particular. Jamie headed straight for the far end of the deck, where Matt noticed an old dart board. Jamie tugged the darts from the board and walked back toward the boys.

“Wanna play?” she asked, offering Matt the darts with the blue stripes.

“As long as I get some practice throws first,” he answered.

Joe took a seat on one of the lawn chairs and watched his friends duel from the back. Jamie’s first toss bounced off the board and onto the deck. Matt voiced his pleasure, all but guaranteeing a victory before giving Jamie some advice.

“You know, you’ve got to put some ‘umph’ into that thing. It’s not going to stick if you lob it in there like it’s a horseshoe or something.”

“Now, see, that’s why you are going to get beat,” Jamie answered confidently. “It’s all in the wrist. You’ll notice that that was a good throw, it just happened to bounce out of th—“

“That’s the thing, though,” Joe chimed in. “If it doesn’t stick, it doesn’t count. Like my counterpart said, this isn’t horseshoes.”

“You boys...” Jamie failed to complete her sentence. The boys weren’t sure whether she couldn’t think of a comeback or was just too shy to say it.

“Sermon wasn’t bad today,” Matt said, changing the subject abruptly. Jamie and Joe exchanged a glance, surprised that their friend had been the one to bring up the church service.

“Yeah, and actually that wasn’t one of his better ones,” Jamie answered. “Think you’ll come back next week?”

“I’ll come back when you guys sing again,” Matt answered defiantly. “I was impressed. I didn’t think Joe had any talent.”

“Thanks, buddy, why don’t you just go run a mile or something?”

Matt shook his head and refused to take the banter any further. Matt and Jamie continued throwing darts, although there wasn’t a real structure to their game. They decided not to compete after they realized they were equally bad. Neither the wrist method nor the “umph” theory was working. Soon, the leisure was interrupted.

“You ready to go?” Jamie’s mom asked sweetly when she came through the screen door. Matt noticed that she was a pretty adult. She was a slender, forty-something mother of three, who shared Jamie’s eyes and smile. She thumped Joe on the head as she walked behind him.

“Yeah,” Jamie answered just as sweetly as her mother had asked. “I was just teaching these boys a thing or two about darts.”

“It’s all in the wrist,” her mother answered, sparking Jamie to shoot the boys an “I told you so” look that caused Joe and Matt to simultaneously roll their eyes..

Jamie stood and turned to leave. She thanked Joe for allowing her to enjoy dinner with his family and she thanked Matt for joining the families at church. She was beautiful at that moment, Matt thought; her curly hair was pulled up in an elegant bun, revealing her graceful, swan-like neck. For the first time in recent memory, Matt followed the lines of the neck up to look at a girl’s face, quite a change from following the lines of a girl’s neck down to other regions of the body. The thought didn’t even occur to him that he could gaze downward, his respect for Jamie as a person being too great. The metamorphosis could be attributed to a leap in maturity. High school does wonderful things to people. Maybe Matt had graduated from the hormone-saturated life of middle school to the adult-esque existence that is grades nine through twelve. Or maybe it wasn’t his age that caused the change; perhaps it was the subject of his admiration. Never before had he been so floored by a girl. He had seen some good-looking females in his day, no doubt, but none could compare – Matt felt – with the all-around wonder of Jamie Boyd.

She followed her parents with a step down from Joe’s front porch. She walked to her father’s silver car, opened the back door, and climbed in with a smile on her face. Meanwhile, Joe was trying to get Matt’s attention to no avail. In a last-ditch, desperation move, he picked up a soft, foam-rubber ball and chucked it at Matt’s noggin.

“So do you think you’ll want to come with me more often?” Matt said after getting the ball thrown back at him.

“Only if she comes,” Matt said as Jamie rode away. She extended her arm through the open car window and waved gracefully to the boys left playing darts on the porch.

Joe whirled around and faced Matt after throwing his last dart. “For crying out loud, just ask the girl out!”

Matt stared down at the ground for a second to gather his thoughts. He then unleashed his now famous freshman dating theory to his best friend.

“What are we going to do?” Matt asked wisely. “Hold hands at lunch? We’re not quite to driving age, and I’m way past the parents-drop-you-off-at-the-movies age. We’re ‘tweenagers’.”

“‘Tweenagers’?”

“Yeah, you know, between two stages in life. Too young for one thing, too old for another. It’s just like going to church.”

“Oh, it is?” Matt’s mention of church made Joe’s ears perk up. He didn’t consider himself a theological “tweenager.” Matt began tossing his darts at the board as he explained the terminology.

“Yeah. For example, I’m too old to follow my dad to church because he says I have to go, but I can’t commit to going on my own yet either. I have way too much stuff to do first.”

“Stuff?” came the response. “Like what?”

“Like being a high school student, a college student, trying some things, drinking a beer, looking at girls, cussing, laughing at people, breaking a damn world record.” Matt smiled about the world record. He was serious about everything else. “You’ve got to try

those things at some point in your life. How can you say mayonnaise is the best when you've never tasted Miracle Whip?"

"Miracle Whip?" Joe wrinkled his forehead.

"Yeah, it's a lifestyle," Matt elaborated while yanking the darts from the board.

"You either eat one or the other, not both. But you can't say which one it is that you love until you've tried each of them."

"You'd think God would be Miracle Whip," Joe quipped.

"Either way," Matt said throwing the darts again, even though it was Joe's turn.

"So I've tried the whole church thing, but I've never lived the mayonnaise lifestyle."

"You just have to believe that Miracle Whip is a better way to go," Joe argued.

He then stopped himself and tossed the culinary metaphor aside. His speech was more direct now. "You have to choose to be with God. He'll let you live that other lifestyle if you want to, but he really wants you to stay away from it."

"He doesn't seem too anxious about recruiting me," Matt answered almost without emotion. He threw the last dart, then turned to look his friend directly in the eye. "I haven't heard a thing from him in fifteen years. How do you explain that, Joe?"

Matt's last sentence was more of a statement than a question. He didn't want Joe to explain anything. No, that would be too difficult. All he wanted was to be left alone and left to his task of being rebellious.

"Revelation 3:20," Joe answered after a minute of silence.

"What?" Matt questioned.

"The book of Revelation. Chapter three. Verse twenty."

"So what's it say?"

“You have to look it up,” Joe answered thoughtfully. “I’m not going to do all the work for you here.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “You and your ploys to get people to read the Bible...I don’t even know if we have a Bible in our house.”

“Well, if you want an answer to your question, you’re gonna have to get one. I can only take you so far.” Joe was stringing Matt along and loving every minute of it. It was a playful conversation, even though the topic was very serious — at least it was to Joe. “And another thing,” Joe continued. “You absolutely suck at darts.”

Matt made a quarter turn to the left and faced the dartboard. He had just thrown six darts. Two of them notched a total of seven points; two hit the board, but were far outside of the target, and two sailed over the board completely. He laughed as he shoved his hands into his blue jean pockets and vowed to stick to running. With his hands still in his jeans, Matt tilted his arm to check his watch. It was past three o’clock and he needed to go home. He called his dad and then the two friends talked and laughed until Chris showed up and honked the horn.

“That’s my ride” Matt said, rising out of his chair. “See you tomorrow.”

“Hey,” Joe shouted at Matt as he was walking out the door. When he turned, Matt was hit in the gut with a thin, leather-bound Bible. Then he reminded Matt of the verse with all the answers. “Revelation 3:20,” he said.

“You and you ploys.”

Matt turned and walked out the door with the Bible in his right hand. He climbed into his dad’s reliable car and the two drove off. Matt and his dad exchanged some small talk and then the guys fell silent for a few minutes. At that time, Matt picked up the

Bible from his lap and turned to the index. He found Revelation, the last chapter of the Bible, and flipped the pages. The thin, white paper was lined on the outside with a strip of gold that wasn't noticeable when the pages were separated, but when the book was closed, the light — any light — that hit the pages created an awesome glow. Thousands of pages tickled Matt's thumb as he flipped to the back of the book. He finally found Revelation and looked for chapter three, verse twenty, just as Joe had told him. He found it, marked it with his index finger and looked over at his father, who had a small grin on his face. He then returned his eyes to the page in front of him.

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Chapter 6

It's as simple as chemistry, really. How people become who they are. In the chemical sciences, a few elements are combined to yield one or two more products. You start with element A, and add B, possibly helped along by element C. What you end up with is something not completely new, but something that contains parts of each of the original elements. So goes growing up. You start as a defenseless being, one that is defined only by the genes passed on from two parents. As you progress through life, you encounter person A and person B, possibly helped along by person C. You respect those people, or in some instances, have no respect for those people. You take the qualities you like, leave the ones you don't, and end up with a product that is different – not completely new, but one that contains parts of each of the original.

Matt Wade's chemical reaction was building as he progressed through his first year of high school. He met more people than he had ever met in his life, and each of them boasted more characteristics than he had ever encountered. And so Matt's inward science project began. It began, not surprisingly, with the student he admired the most: Nathan Marx. Nathan led the Brown team to an impressive cross country season. He and Andy McAffy provided the same strong one-two punch that the team had had the previous two years, but with Matt running strong in the third position, Brown was tough. They even upset a few larger schools to win the conference meet, which was the highlight of their season. Nathan was there the whole time, with his silky stride and sharp sense of humor rubbing off on Matt. But over the course of Matt's freshman year, Nathan's older, caution-to-the-wind lifestyle also started seeping into the freshman's psyche.

The team captured the conference championship on a sunny Saturday morning in mid October. Coach Marty and the rest of the runners owed much of the victory to Matt, who surprised everyone by out-sprinting Andy for fifth place overall. As the team enjoyed a victory lap around the rival Kenwood High School's track, Nathan extended a generous offer to the team's new hero.

"Hey Matt," Nathan hollered back at his freshman friend.

"Yeah?" Matt answered.

"Get up here!" Matt squeezed his way through the pack to join Nathan, who was leading the lap. "Hobbs is having a party tonight. You know, a little celebration for OUR CHAMPIONSHIP!" Nathan's voice became a yell on the final two words of the sentence. The Brown pack answered his call with yells of its own. It was no coincidence that the team was running by Kenwood's squad at that exact moment.

"Anyway," Nathan continued. "You're more than welcome to come. I'll give you a ride if you need one."

This was not just a celebration party. This was the big time. Hobbs was one of the senior runners on the girls' team, and it was understood that this party was not just about celebrating over a can of Pepsi and some pizza. This was a party celebrating being teenagers, which meant wine and women would be involved – even if there were no song. He'd never been invited to such a celebration before, and he initially balked at the invite.

"I don't know," Matt answered, trying to play his response down. "I was just going to chill at home tonight."

"Psh!" was Nathan's response.

Matt knew exactly what that sound meant. It was a sound that Nathan had adopted as his own. It was his version of the more common teenage phrase, 'whatever.' It meant that Nathan found Matt's response unacceptable. The recipient of the 'psh' was then forced to either come up with a better excuse, or forget about ever being invited again.

"You can chill at home any night," Nathan said in a rare justification of his 'psh!' "Tonight, Hobbs is having a party, and if you hadn't run like hell today, there would be no party."

Matt didn't respond.

"Let's start over...Hobbs is having a party tonight to celebrate OUR CHAMPIONSHIP," Nathan shouted as the team jogged past another squad that was packing up to go home. "You are more than welcome to come, and I can give you a ride if you need it. Whaddya say?"

"I'll see what I can do," Matt answered.

"Okay, but you better see by eight o'clock, because that is when I am coming to your house. And we are going to go get some food, and then we are going over to Hobbs'."

"Eight o'clock," Matt repeated.

The phone rang at 6:13 that evening, and Matt inwardly wished Nathan was on the other end, telling him that the party had been called on account of darkness. It's not that he didn't want to go to the celebration. He did. This was going to be his first chance to try mayonnaise lifestyle. He was just petrified, that's all, terrified that this lifestyle wouldn't live up to the billing that he had given it in his imagination. Drinking and

partying with your buddies is the life a high school student should live, he thought, but then he worried that the real life would be left on the couch, hanging out at home. Then, when he turned down the next party invitation, he would lose the stature that he had worked so hard to gain during the first few months of his high school career.

“Matt! Telephone!”

“I got it in here, Dad,” Matt shouted back. He picked up the receiver and was half disappointed that Joe on the other end.

“I heard about your victory,” Joe said. “Way to go.”

“Thanks,” Matt answered. “It was a hard-fought race, but I knew that if we took it one mile at a time, we’d prevail in the end.”

“What am I? A reporter from *Sports Illustrated*?” Joe responded, just as Matt had hoped he would. “No more sound bites. What says we celebrate tonight over a Pepsi and some of the state’s finest pizza?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m celebrating with the team tonight.”

“That’s cool, I figured you might be,” Joe said, knowing full well what celebrating with the team probably entailed. “You need a buddy to go with?”

“Nah, I’ll be alright. I think it’s team only anyway.”

“Guess I missed my shot when I crapped out after that first three-mile run,” Joe joked, thinking back to day one of practice.

“Yeah, you did. I’ll see you Monday, though.”

“How about we see you tomorrow at church?”

“I’ll call you in the morning if I get up in time,” Matt answered.